

# TEACHING BILINGUAL STUDENTS WITH SPECIAL NEEDS: A TEACHER TRAINING ISSUE

By

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### ABSTRACT

*The issue of special needs and the English Language Learner is a complex and complicated one. It involves all of the issues that education for children with special needs has, such as legal issues, psychological issues, parental involvement issues, and the involvement of general education classroom teachers. These issues are intertwined with those of the English Language Learner, such as limited English proficiency of the child and/or parent, cultural issues, language learning issues, and the ability of general education to adequately meet the needs of the ELL students. This article examines research in this field and suggests how schools of education can better prepare teachers for working with this population of students.*

*Keywords: Bilingual Education; English as a Second Language (ESL), Special Needs; Culturally and linguistically diverse exceptional (CLDE) Learners, Teacher Training.*

### INTRODUCTION

In general, English as a Second Language (ESL), Bilingual Education, and general classroom teachers are inadequately prepared to work with English Language Learners (ELLs) who have special needs. This article is an overview of research literature which examines educational, administrative, community, and policy surrounding this topic in order to determine how schools of education can better prepare these teachers to work with this population of students.

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### An Overview of the Research

#### Teacher Efficacy

A study by Paneque and Barbetta (2006) correlate teaching ELLs with special needs and teacher efficacy. They asserted that teachers, whether general education or special education, with high efficacy believe they can positively affect student learning and will make an effort to do so. They also found that teachers with high efficacy tend to make fewer special education referrals. When they examined efficacy as related to ELLs, they found that, by and large, general education and special education teachers, even those with high efficacy, feel least efficacious with ELL students. They cited teacher issues and organizational issues as coming into play. Teacher issues that they identified included dispositions and attitudes, teaching skills, preparation, experience, and field-based experiences in teacher education programs. Organizational issues included language support, and parental support.

An earlier study by Brownell and Parajes (1996, 1999) had found that training is important in building teacher efficacy, whether pre-service teacher training or in-

service training. The study by Paneque and Barbetta (2006) supports this finding. They stated "that there was need for professional training in issues related to the education of culturally and linguistically diverse students with disabilities for individuals working with those students" (p. 186).

## Language Training

One of the issues that Paneque and Barbetta (2006) focused on was that teachers should have knowledge of the student's home language, and they advocate language training for pre-service and in-service teachers of students with special needs. Citing work by other researchers, who had examined issue in the assessment and instruction of bilingual students with special needs (Artiles & Ortiz, 2002; Baca & Cervantes, 2004; Delgado & Rogers-Adkinson, 1999; Winzer & Mozurek, 1998), Paneque and Barbetta (2006) stated that "these experts assert that the use of native language instruction and the development of the native language allow ELLs to build on their prior knowledge and support learning new content material" (p. 184). They also cite work by Carlson et al. (2002) which "found that special education teachers proficient in the language of their students were able to use different instructional strategies to teach English language and academic content" (p. 184). Besides helping the students communicate and learn better in the classroom, Paneque and Barbetta (2006) also asserted that knowledge of the students' home language facilitates communication with parents.

This research is supported by Mueller et al. (2004) who determined that there is no research on how ELL students with learning difficulties are affected by trying to learn two languages - their home language and English. However, the authors have surmised from research by Cummins (1991) and Donovan & Cross (2002) that students with such disabilities need to learn to communicate effectively in their home language before trying to learn another language. Their reasoning is that "children identified as having moderate or severe disabilities typically display many difficulties with communication and language acquisition" (p.232).

## Policy Issues

The Mueller et al. (2004) study found that policy issues and administrative decisions affect the teachers' ability to work with ELL students with disabilities effectively. When policies are ambiguous, school practices tend to be inconsistent and the teachers in this study "reported that their administration did not provide the teachers with guidance regarding planning, assessment, or instructional practices for the ELL students in their classrooms" (p. 243). The researchers recognized such inconsistency as being a serious problem "because children with disabilities are so dependent upon appropriate language and communication programs, it is even more crucial that ELLs with disabilities are provided with well-thought-out and well-developed language instruction" (p. 237). Therefore, they emphasize the importance of teachers receiving proper training in how to work with ELL students. The teachers in this study also expressed an interest in learning Spanish, so they could communicate better with their Spanish-speaking students and their families.

## Parental Support

Robinson's (2000) research found that if schools set up effective support for parents, the teacher will be able to more effectively teach ELLs with special needs. She emphasized that parents of ELL children with disabilities do want to be involved with their children's education but often obstacles such as not speaking English, or not speaking it well, their own limited experience with schooling, lack of time, and general lack of information about what services are available and how to obtain them stand in the way. Oftentimes these parents do not know what their rights are, and may assume the school is doing the best thing for their child. Robinson (2000) states that the educator must be aware that there are different cultural norms for how one interacts with school personnel and differing cultural views of special needs.

In their examination of special education services for ELLs, Torres-Burgo et al. (1999) found that ELL students with special needs are often misdiagnosed and do not receive adequate proper services. Like Robinson (2000) they assert, that part of the problem is that parents who do

not know English or have limited English often do not have adequate access to information about their child with special needs, what their rights are and what services are available. According to research by Torres-Burgo et al. (1999), despite regulations in IDEA (Individuals with Disabilities Education Act) which are supposed to guarantee parental access and involvement, non-English speaking parents' students actually receive less information and clarification than English speaking parents. The research also found that in order for parental support programs to be effective, school administration has to be supportive.

Hoover & Patton (2005) also suggest that ELLs often are over-identified, under-identified, and/or mis-identified for special education services because "the learning and behavior problems of ELL students may encompass several factors, such as different socio-linguistic and cultural background, adjustment to a new socio-cultural milieu, the presence of a disability, or a combination of these factors" (p. 231). This statement supports the findings of Gonzalez, Brusco-Vega, and Yowkey (1997) in their study of assessment and instruction issues related to culturally and linguistically diverse students.

## Instructional Issues

Because of the complexity of these students' needs, their instruction must be multi-faceted in order to be effective, incorporating a variety of techniques and strategies. Hoover & Patton (2005) assert that "differentiation must take place in the mainstream classroom and the resource room to be most effective" (p. 234). Hoover et al. (2008) support using a variety of instructional strategies and practices, including differentiated learning, Three-Tiered instruction, Response to Intervention (RTI), and Standards-Based Learning and Assessment to effectively teach students who are ELL and have special needs. Chomot & O'Malley (1994) also assert that effective teaching for ELLs and ELLs with disabilities must focus on content and language as well as on cognitive development. They state that: "Students with learning disabilities represent the largest category of special education students and [benefit] from learning strategy instruction" (p. 180).

Hoover et al. (2008) assert that the special education teacher already has knowledge and expertise about adapting curriculum to meet individual student needs. Teaching ELL students with special needs requires this same type of perspective on teaching with a bit more complexity. "Teachers must become familiar with several interrelated elements of education, including linguistically diverse education, second language acquisition, special education needs and characteristics, and the role of culture in teaching and learning" (p. 5). Therefore, instruction for these students must be appropriate and the curriculum should reflect an understanding of their cultural values (Hoover & Patton, 2005). Hoover et al. (2008) cite research that supports their perspective that the challenges faced by the special needs bilingual student, "a range of cognitive, academic, and language learning needs," (p.89) can best be met with "careful planning and intervention" (p. 89). They also emphasize that education for these students be approached from a strengths-based model which "emphasizes high expectations for these students" (p. 89), rather than from the traditional deficit model which focuses on the students' limitations. Collaboration between the special education staff and the bilingual/ESL staff are essential to provide best education for this population of students.

Several models of bilingual/ESL Special Education are presented by Hoover et al. (2008). They suggest that in the best of all possible worlds, there would be an integrated model in which there is "a bilingual special education teacher who is trained in both fields and able to deliver the services independently" (p. 91). Unfortunately the model implemented in a school often depends on financial considerations and availability of qualified teachers rather than on needs of the students.

## Legal Issues

Hoover et al. (2008) remind their readers that there are also legal issues involved in teaching students with special needs no matter their linguistic background. IDEA 2004 and No Child Left behind (NCLB) both mandate how children with disabilities must be educated, and in different ways, each provides support for accommodations for students with disabilities.



## Discussion and Conclusion

The various studies presented here demonstrate the complexity and the variety of the issues when educating ELLs with special needs. Whether the issues are directly related to the teacher, such as assessment and instructional issues, or issues to be dealt with on the larger scale such as policy and administration issues in the school, or legal and parental rights issues in the school community, the teacher is often the person in the best position to be the student's advocate.

Based on the information from these studies, I believe that schools of education should consider a *Teaching ESL/Bilingual Students with Special Needs* course as a requirement for all ESL and Bilingual Education majors, and it should be offered as an elective for general education teachers. The issues and needs of these students are different from and more complex than those of ELL students who do not have special needs. There are different demands at all levels, the school, the teacher, the family, and the student. Professional training which directly addresses these issues can help teachers advocate for and facilitate establishing consistent policies at all levels. Whether developing language skills, or learning specific techniques for working with these students, professional development aimed working with English Language students with special needs will improve teacher efficacy and help teachers best serve all their students.

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